

Auction Donations

Our annual arts and crafts auction will be held in the spring. This is our major fundraiser, so if you have something to donate, please email us. Of course, if you want to donate money (all contributions are tax-deductible), that is happily accepted too!

November Election

If you would like some non-partisan information about the state propositions and our local candidates, you can get it at smartvoter.org

A service of the League of Women Voters

Goats, fire prevention, and habitat health

Stephen Dreher, BFS manager

This past month the Field Station had some unusual visitors. A herd of hungry goats and their owners, Hugh and Sara Buntun of Lakeview, Oregon, set up camp in the north "neck" area. It was definitely a sight to behold with over 250 critters eating away at dried sagebrush and leafy poison oak. Those of you living in Claremont probably read the Claremont Courier illustrated article, but for those who missed it, here's some background on why they were here.

The LA County Fire Department has taken a more aggressive stance on vegetation clearance since the Padua fire. Lawsuits between residents and the City of Claremont have served to exacerbate the situation. Inspectors initially ordered large scale clearing by the residents north of BFS as well as within our northern border area. The residents have left much of the native vegetation, choosing to live with it rather than destroy what little of the natural world remains in our area. Naturally the inspectors zeroed in on this area.

The Fire authorities wanted us to clear a large section and, if we failed to comply, planned to hire a landscape crew to clear it and send us the bill. I recalled a presentation by the Buntens at the Botanic Garden about their use of goats to control invasive species and thin vegetation in fire prone areas, so I got in touch. They were finishing a job elsewhere in the Claremont foothills and agreed to come down to the BFS.

Amazingly, the goats will eat even poison oak and there are impenetrable areas of the stuff in sections of the BFS, so bringing them in produced some benefit by reducing this as well as by meeting the fire department's orders. The treated area of the BFS was a dense section of aging sagebrush and other subshrubs. Dried coastal scrub species such as these carry the main fire danger in the summer. These are tough species and will regrow from the base, as will the poison oak. Goats can also target large stands of dried mustard and grasses and may come back sometime to do this. These invasive, annual, European species provide the heavy ground cover of kindling

that makes current fires hotter and more intense than in the past. Trees, cacti and larger shrubs were essentially left alone by the goats or only had their "skirts" eaten. It was surprising how much cactus was revealed after the goats set to work!

As urban *Homo sapiens* spreads, the pressure to prevent fires at the urban/wildland interface grows. Much of California's native vegetation, especially the chaparral and coastal sage scrub plant communities, is not only fire-adapted, but requires it for good health. Periodic fire has historically been the agent for habitat renewal, removing thick and dying scrub and opening up space for new plants to emerge. These events are usually followed by a year or two of abundant annual wildflowers. Now, with homes scattered everywhere, fire is actively prevented. Fire-suppression leads to ever thicker and older cover. This will inevitably burn, and will do so at temperatures and at an intensity greater than the plants are adapted to, often killing those that would normally come back from their crowns. Bulldozing the plants out of existence is even worse. There just aren't that many habitat management tools to use in these problem zones.

The goats may be a way to simulate the fire process, at least at some level, without risking the potentially catastrophic results of a large-scale fire. True, the smoke generated by fire will be missing; smoke that is known to trigger germination in some fire-following plants. It will be interesting to see what grows after the winter rains. We need to determine positive methods for reducing wildfire risk while keeping what remains of our native ecosystems, especially in heavily urbanized regions where "controlled" burns are just not going to happen. The BFS land has not had a significant fire or clearing in many decades. I was reminded of this clearly as embers landed on the Station during the Padua fire. With more of the nearby wildland disappearing monthly, if the BFS burned, where exactly would its wildlife go? Where else would there be sources for the seeds of the rare plants it currently supports? What would be the future for the BFS if a blaze spread outside our fence? We hope goats will be one useful tool for addressing these issues.

Teachers: to arrange a visit, call Stephen Dreher at 624-6661 or fill out a use form online.



"A tour of the property readily convinces visitors of the importance of keeping such a beautiful expanse of land, shrubs, and trees for scientific purposes."

Robert J. Bernard in "An Unfinished Dream" pg 708

If you would like to be put on the snail-mail or email list, please send a note to bfsfriends@earthlink.net

